NYC
VOTER EXPERIENCE
REPORT // Briefing Memo

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Findings and Design Recommendations from **pollwatch** USA data.

As a nation, we expend enormous resources identifying, targeting, and delivering voters to the polls. Improving the voter experience *at the polls* merits an effort as well.

All too often voting—the most basic act of civic engagement—is fraught with challenges.

Lines are unwieldy, signs are confusing, check-in processes are inefficient, poll workers are undertrained, voting machines are insufficient, and technology is poorly utilized.

When voting becomes problematic and frustrating, political participation suffers.

The PollWatch team set out to uncover and alleviate the challenges that voters face on Election Day.

On November 6, 2012, PollWatch solicited citizen feedback about their interactions at polling sites around New York City.

Our findings are not exhaustive. We drew our conclusions from a small sample, and our recommendations require further testing.

However, our analysis indicates that quick, inexpensive, common-sense solutions could go a long way toward improving the voter experience.

VOICES FROM THE POLLS
Excerpts from 2012 PollWatch Reports

"The lines were confusing and long. The poll workers were confused and had no idea what was going on. One of the scanners broke, and they continued trying to scan ballots into it anyway...It was a mess."

12:51 pm, 95 Lenox Ave, New York, NY

"1 functioning ballot scanner, 3 not working. Hundreds in line. I left without having my ballot scanned after 90 minutes."

11:04 am, 421 East 88th Street, New York, NY

"There was no one instructing you what to do when you arrive...People are confused and frustrated in here. Someone needs to think about the overall experience of the voter from the moment they walk in... it feels like there's no one managing this site."

12:37 pm, E 5th St, New York, NY

"Three hour wait, poll workers telling people different things, broken scanners, oh, and a FIGHT"

11:45 pm, 900 St Marks Ave, Brooklyn, NY

FINDINGS

Our analysis points to one very clear challenge:

NYC poll sites are not currently resourced or designed for actual voter turnout patterns.

The data indicates that voter turn-out is greater in the mornings and evenings yet, polling site resources appear to be calculated for a uniform hourly turnout rate, exacerbating three key poll site challenges.
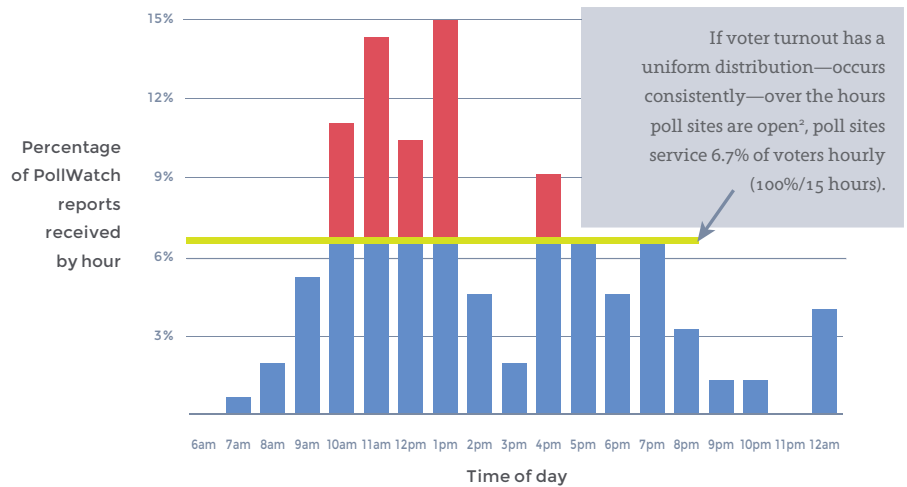
KEY POLL SITE CHALLENGES:

1 **Confusing Site Layout**

2 **Slow Check-In**

3 **Technology Misfires**

Percentage of PollWatch reports received by hour

Time of day

If voter turnout has a uniform distribution—occurs consistently—over the hours poll sites are open[2], poll sites service 6.7% of voters hourly (100%/15 hours).

The chart above shows the percentage of PollWatch reports received by hour on Election Day. We assume the reporting pattern approximates the voting pattern.
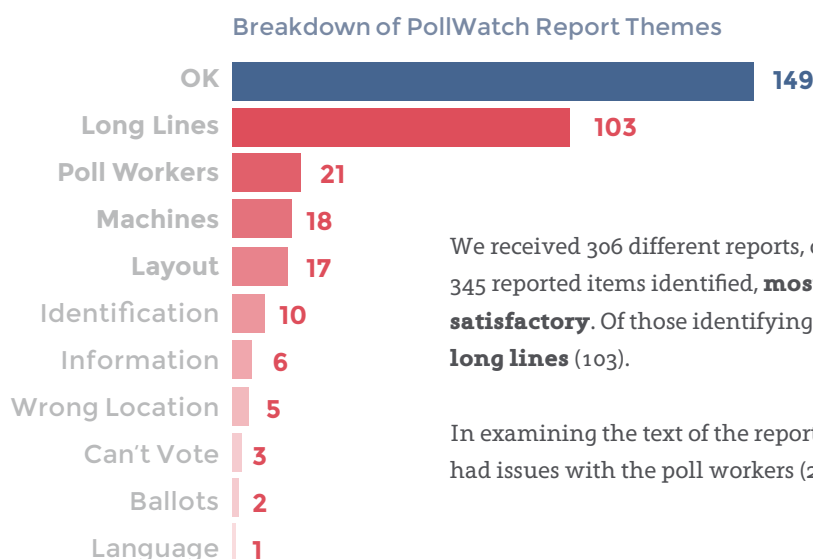
If we assume, as the Board of Electons appears to do[1], that voter turnout occurs approximately consistently over the hours poll sites are open, poll sites would serve the same number of voters every hour[2] (as indicated above by the green line).

However, we can see that there are **periods of peak demand** (morning and around lunch, when the bars exceed the average). **Poll sites struggle to accommodate the influx** of voters at these times.

1. *An Analysis of the Number of Voters per Voting Machine*, NYC Board of Elections, Aug 2006

2. We do not know the uniform hourly voter turnout rate that the Board's resource allocations cover. The calculation may, for example, cover a larger percentage per hour than 6.7%. However, our reports of wait times clearly suggest that current resource allocations are insufficient for peak periods.

DATA

Breakdown of PollWatch Report Themes

Theme	Count
OK	149
Long Lines	103
Poll Workers	21
Machines	18
Layout	17
Identification	10
Information	6
Wrong Location	5
Can't Vote	3
Ballots	2
Language	1

PollWatch reports shed light on common poll site experiences.

We received 306 different reports, often with multiple problems in each. Of the 345 reported items identified, **most indicated that the voting process was satisfactory**. Of those identifying problems, the **largest category by far was long lines** (103).

In examining the text of the reports, we uncovered that people most often had issues with the poll workers (21), ballot scanners (18) and layout (17).

1

Confusing Site Layout

*"Massive chaos here...Very **long snaking lines overlapping each other** and in and out traffic flow. Took over 2 hours to vote. Many potential voters walking out."*

~ 10:46 am, 35th ave, Astoria, NY

THE CHALLENGE

Variations in voter turnout throughout the day strain the capacity of polling sites and create confusion, given their current design.

In particular:

1. **Informal and chaotic lines** form due to a **lack of spatial planning for peak periods** of demand.

2. **Signage** indicating the voting process is often **not easily visible from the entrances or between steps** and rarely clearly worded. For example:

   • The voter instruction poster—which is the sole explanation of the voting process—suffers from an **overabundance of data** and is **not well structured** for easy comprehension.
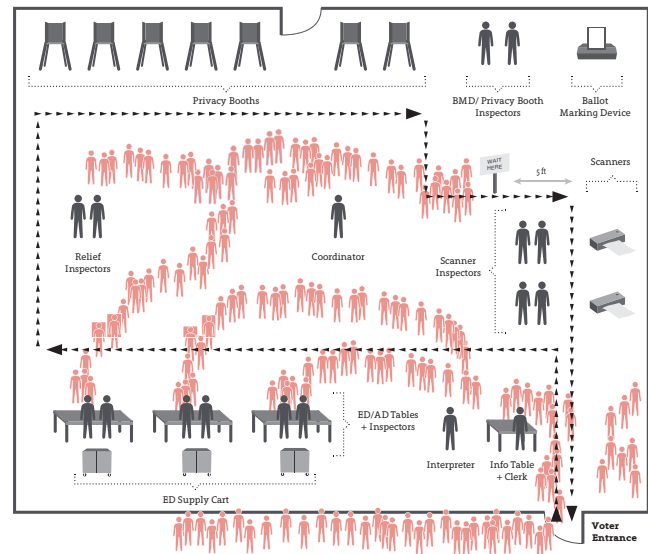
Board of Elections poll site layout, strained at capacity

IDEAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

A well-planned layout **could better accomodate peak periods**:

VISUAL CUES

Adopt color-coded district tables corresponding to **colored lines** on the floor, which could be as inexpensive as low-tack painters' tape.

LINE LAYOUT

Pretermine and clearly mark lines and critical paths. Create **auxilary waiting lines** if services or technology should back up.
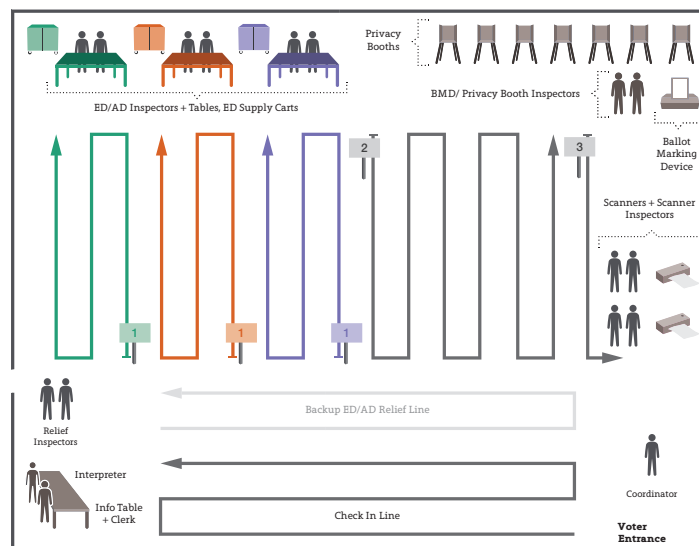
Recommended poll site layout redesign

CLEAR SIGNAGE

Use clear language and make visual connections between stages of the process, keeping in mind **voters' sight lines** along the way.

Signage should communicate ways to expedite the process before voters move into the information desk waiting line.

2

Slow Check-In

*"I got in line around 8:45 and left around 10:15am...**the system was very disorganized with multiple lines**; the workers were chatting with each other, not giving updates and the line was moving so very slowly. **I saw at least 10 people including myself leave because of the wait**...I will try to get back there before 9pm."*

~ 10:49 am, 652 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY

THE CHALLENGE

Voter check-in and ballot pick up locations are similarly ill-equipped to accommodate variations in voter turnout, which leads to further delays.

This is a result of:

1. **An insufficient number of poll workers** during peak periods of demand.

2. **Inadequate training** for poll workers that is limited to multiple choice paper exams.

1. **Inefficient, cumbersome processes,** such as **poorly configured voter sign-in books** that inhibit fast searching.
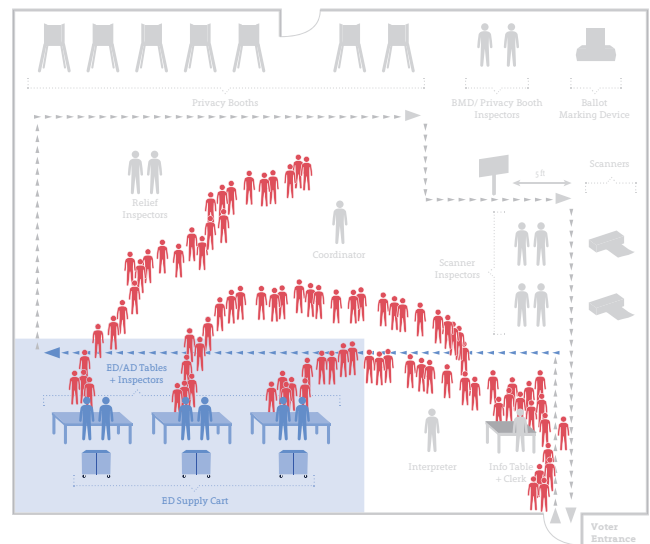
Board of Elections poll site layout, delayed check-in

IDEAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Recommended voter sign-in book redesign

Common sense, quick fixes could easily make voter check-in and ballot pick up a more seamless process during peak periods of demand. For example:

1. **Staff polling sites more flexibly,** with an emphasis on deploying greater numbers of poll workers for shorter shifts during peak periods.

2. **Provide more specialized training** to poll workers, including simulated trials.

3. **Redesign the voter sign-in book for faster searches** by adding letter tabs and making it easier to divide the check-in process between multiple poll workers.

3

Technology Misfires

*"Just before 7 am, the **machines were down** and instructions given were incorrect. At first, they handed out **provisional ballots without voting cards**, and then changed it to the normal ballots **to be scanned in later hopefully.** The chaos and misinformation, coupled with long lines led to frustration and probably people walked out."*

~ 9:55 am, 91 Claremont Avenue, New York, NY

THE CHALLENGE
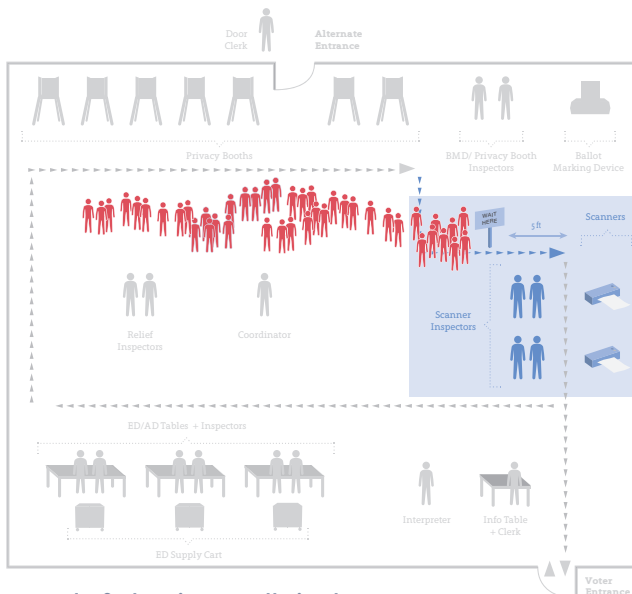
Board of Elections poll site layout, backed up ballot scanning

Inevitable technology misfires further intensify delays during periods of peak demand. In particular:

1. **Ballot scanners break down, on average, more than once per polling site** and take an average of 45 minutes to repair.

2. **Poll workers do not consistently use backup ballot boxes,** which do not appear as a natural part of the voting process.

3. **The limited promotion of existing tools**, such as NYC's Poll Finder app, represents **a missed opportunity for greater efficiency**. If widely used, this tool, for example, could help alleviate crowding at poll site entrances, by allowing voters to bypass the information table.

IDEAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

While technology breakdowns may be unavoidable, their consequences do not have to be. For example:

Recommended auxiliary ballot box redesign

1. **Ensure enough ballot scanning machines are available** for peak periods of demand. Assuming some will fail, include built-in redundancy.

2. **Redesign the backup ballot box** to create a trusted, official auxiliary mode of submitting ballots when machines are down.

3. **Promote the Poll Finder app** as a valuable source for election day information.

4. **Share real-time data feeds** so that civic-minded coders can build innovative election day tools to further improve the voter experience.
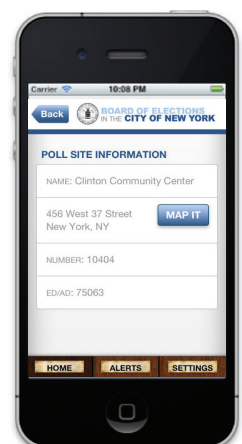

NYC Poll Finder app

About the Report

This Voter Experience Report is based on data collected through the PollWatch project.

PollWatch is a non-partisan way to crowdsource and report problems at the polls on election day. When a voter uses PollWatch to report a problem, it is mapped on a public website and reported to the relevant election administration. The data collected is open and accessible through an API.
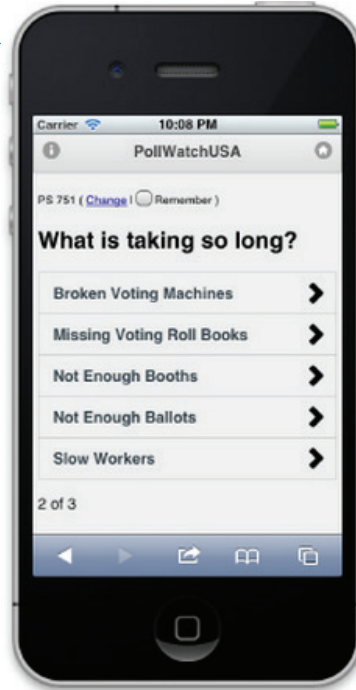
The project's goal is to facilitate solving those problems as quickly as possible, so that any voter who wants to vote is able to do so easily.

PollWatch is a joint project of Common Cause/NY, Reboot, and Websava and won first prize at the Civic Engagement Hackathon sponsored by the Personal Democracy Forum in June, 2012.

About Reboot

Reboot is working toward a 21st century social contract.

We partner with the world's leading organizations to design and implement participatory platforms for human development. Our interventions enable institutions and the communities they serve to collectively tackle social challenges.

Reboot's efforts have improved policies, programs, and services in some of the world's most challenging environments. Our expertise extends across sectors as diverse as civic engagement, healthcare, agriculture, public finance, media, education, financial services, and technology.

Reboot's team of creative problem solvers is dedicated to helping organizations become more responsive to the communities they serve. This is our contribution to the promise of better governance and the hope of realizing a 21st century social contract.

Connect with us at **www.TheReboot.org**